

THE UNSEEN FACE OF THE REPRESENTATION – THE CHRISTIANITY ICON

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Abstract. *The Byzantine art has gain the best way of expression through its characteristic painting method. By the help of a sacral image, the Divinity became more accessible to humans, who tend to aspire to it. But the religious icon does not represent reality or terrestrial life, but the essence of living. An iconography was also born, representing Jesus Christ, Mother Mary or other saints, in which the material life was detrimental to spirituality. The icon's characters were deformed, their bodies and faces were elongated, in order to suggest transfiguration. Painting an icon was not simple because the artist had to know the methodology and the representation canons. This study offers a better understanding of the relationship between plastic-expressive means and the spiritual, sacral part of Christian icon [1].*

Keywords: *Byzantine art, icon, transcendence, Western Church, Christianity, iconography.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The soul of Byzantine art is its inner light. The roots of light are found in Antiquity, when Platon turns it into a religious philosophy: the light is seen not with the physical eyes, but with the inner ones, which lead the world to the supreme divine contemplation. Colors are born through light, shapes are visible only by its presence.

In the western painting, one can usually observe a relation between light and color. This is not the case for a Byzantine icon, not meant to create the reality illusion. The icon emotional character spreads, making the viewer to face a different artistic vision that has nothing to do with natural light or the “trompe l’oil” effect; it is so much more than that. The lighted areas do not intend to impute atmosphere or space impact to the viewer; it just bounds him with the representation in a close, intimate dialogue. The achromatic colors of white or complementary color pairs are thus obvious.

The light's purpose in the Christian typology (Fig. 1) is to immaterialize the material, to transfigure the world only by the Lord's uncreated energies.

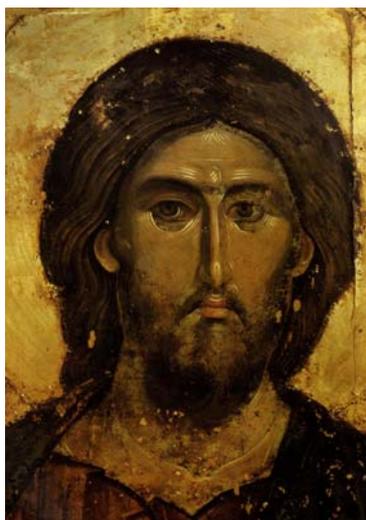


Fig. 1. Jesus Christ – Hilandar Monastery, Athos Mountain, XIIIth Century

2. DISCUSSION

The term “icon” comes from the grecian “Eykon”, which means image, face. It is the general term for every Christian, sacral, two-dimensional image, used as a cult object. It offers the possibility to imagine the transcendence without confusing it with the reality [2]. For Christians, the icon represents a sacral image born from a prototype; in this case the prototype is the unique human being.

The Orthodox tradition is based on an image typology, uncreated by the hands of men, especially the representations of Jesus Christ and his Mother Mary. These typical religious themes are painted in icon without any interpretations or modifications. This tradition was born in Byzantium through the existence of some old iconographic hand writings, called by the artists “Erminii”.

As an artistic genre, the icon does not belong to plastic or decorative arts, because its main function is not esthetical, but religious; still it perfectly combines the plastic and decorative elements, characteristics, types of contrasts and execution treatment [3].

The point it’s the smallest element in the image morphology, and carries out a decorative role for the entire painting surface and flat shapes, which are profoundly animated by its presence.

The line has the same decoration, construction role, but with shape and color offers atmosphere and perspective effect to the icon’s plastic surface. When it’s used to enrich the surface, it is traced in a thin, continuous, achromatic manner. This sort of line can be seen in the architecture, furniture, clothing creation industries. But in this religious representation, the line comes to complete the shape, suggesting the light and shadow of a clothing piece, drapery or architectural element. Here the master’s true talent, dedication and technique can be easily observed. Even if it is a graphic line with different thickness and lengths, or a constructive, space-creating one, its necessity is unimaginable. Through generated rhythms, it participates to the entire compositional structure.

The line is the main plastic element used in icon and has the same importance as color. All architectural, clothing, face details are put under the line’s credits, and through shape it transforms in a transition tone, when color is added. The line is modeling the surface with signs, in order to suggest a type of atmosphere, through gradual colors and values painted to create unity. In this unique manner, the painter will not attempt to adjust the chromatic contrasts, but to enrich them with lines, points and graphic details. This is the icon’s charm

and esthetic, and though is full of details; the color strength is not mitigated, but more obvious [4].

The composition represents the geometric frame where the entire icon's action can be painted. But in many cases, this painting surface can be divided into geometric modules; usually the wood panels have rectangular shape, under the established limits of the Golden Harmony. Other kinds of frames can also be used, but more rarely, like the circle, square, triangle, etc.

An icon made in the religious way spreads harmony all around it. The evolution of iconography was the result of many centuries full of technique challenges and different painting practices. It was a slow process made with the help of many artists' generations. This is how its structure and composition defined in time, from generation to generation, until it became a complete art piece.

But a question still remained without answer: Is the initial geometric structure the result of all this hard work done from generation to generation or it is just a predefined frame that existed from the very first beginning? The historical sources show that this structure was born from the artists' attempts to create the best base for their paintings, but it is also a matter of personal taste.

Most of the icons are built on a rectangular structure, in which the rapport between the two sides is the golden number. It was very necessary for the painter to have knowledge about the iconographic subjects and composition possibilities; this is how he created the medieval painting handbooks [5].

The composition schemes were mentioned in the XVI-XVII-th century manuscripts, and contained just the triangle, cross, and circle plans. The essence of the icon composition (Fig. 2) scheme was the human body in his unique perfection [6].



Fig. 2. Eleusa – A type of Eastern Orthodox icon of the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary, depicted with the infant Jesus Christ nestled against her cheek, XIIth Century.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Christian painting is treating one major subject- human soul caught in the body. The human body in Christianity isn't seen as a terrestrial beauty, vitality, sensuality and energy, as the Ancient Greece used to believe. The Byzantine beauty consists in the human nature as a part of divine creation.

Platon used to say that art doesn't imitate the visible objects, but the energy, spirituality that they emanate. The world represented by Byzantine art is transcendent, but not illusion, it is a world of a new spiritual dimension [7].

Once rejected the illusion representation, the grecian canon does no longer have an impact to religious art, because the Byzantine character becomes a typology related to eternity. Proportion schemes for biblical characters are based on modules, compositional elements that create space harmony [8].

Without the Hellenistic canon, this new one has adapted to changes, to the idea of "man- part of the universe", and as a consequence, the characters became spiritualized, taller, and armorial. The character's head was the measure point, so their height was seven – eight heads, reaching sometimes to eleven heads taller [9].

In the Western Church the evolution of icon and its execution was different. The religious icon had transformed here, in time in easel painting. In the occidental practice, the artist was free in execution, expression and technique, not being subjected to the Church prototypes or textbooks iconography.

The religious icon has a central place in human mentality; it is the path to Lord and Divinity, just because an image tells more than all the writings in the world [10].

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